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AUTHOR Sivell, John N.
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ABSTRACT

A newspaper produced by students of English as a second language (ESL) is an old idea rarely put into practice. However, word processing and simple desktop publishing technology can help realize several often elusive goals of ESL: creation of an authentic information vehicle providing contact with a genuine audience (other students); involvement of writers at different ability levels; flexible integration of different kinds of work, prepared at variable rates and in any order; and production of a written document truly reflecting the interests and identities of its student authors. Such a project requires careful assessment of and adherence to specific communicative criteria. In addition, newspapers can work only with considerable cooperation among students and the teacher. These more personal elements are as important as the technology. The potential difficulties must be addressed realistically for the effort to be successful. (Author/MSE)

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A WORD-PROCESSED STUDENT NEWSPAPER: WHY? -- HOW? -- SO WHAT?

TESOL Conference Presentation
Chicago, March 1988

John N. Sivell
Department of Applied Language Studies
Brock University
St. Catharines
Ontario, CANADA L2S 3A1

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ABSTRACT

The ESL student newspaper is an old idea rarely put into actual practice. Word processing and simple desktop publishing technology, however, can help us finally realize the newspaper goals that we have always sought but that have often proved illusive: creation of an authentic information gap, through contact with a genuine audience; involvement of writers at differing ability levels; flexible integration of different kinds of work, prepared at varied rates and in any order; production of a written document truly reflecting the interests and identity of its student authors. But the project requires hard-headed assessment of, and adherence to, specific communicative criteria. Moreover, newspapers can only work with a fairly large amount of cooperation among colleagues. These more personal elements are as important as the modern technology, and it is necessary to foresee the potential difficulties realistically, in order to handle them with success.

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BACKGROUND

Establishment of a student newspaper is not, on the face of it, a pedagogical innovation; this avenue for authentic communication and creativity is frequently recommended. Regrettably, however, newspapers are not actually used with similar regularity! Such a weak link between theory and practice is hardly encouraging, but the first step towards improvement must a frank appraisal of the problem as it really exists. And fortunately, experience with ESL newspapers not only highlights several of the difficulties that can discourage newspaper production, but also suggests solutions capable of bringing success. In large measure, the answer lies in resourcefully exploiting up-to-date technology: word processing, especially in the form of simple desktop publishing. Guiding that exploitation, however, must be well-informed and vigilant application of the theory of language-use as communication -- which implies not just lip service, but rigorous pursuit of genuinely communicative

objectives. And finally -- often the most unpredictable element -- cooperation from colleagues, both within one's own ESL program and without, is essential. Neglect of any of these three elements entails a risk of disappointment.

WHY?

Few ESL teachers would deny that much of what we make our students write has -- despite our best efforts -- very little reality as authentic communication. Read once or twice by the teacher, corrected, returned, occasionally reread by the student author, and then irretrievably filed or just thrown away at once, most pieces of student writing exist (almost) entirely as exercises in formal accuracy, so that whatever ghostly content they may have serves principally as a kind of utilitarian stuffing to fill out demonstrations of neat grammatical or rhetorical needle-work. Whether treating a burning social issue, or just rehashing some mindless version of "What I did on my Summer Holidays", all too many student compositions have little or nothing to say about the nominal topic of the assignment; the real message -- what Austin taught us to call the "illocutionary force" (Austin, 1962: 98-101) -- of such writing, whatever the announced subject, is always approximately, "See? -- my spelling's good and I've finally got the past tense under control. Please give me at least a B." Of course, this criticism is by now quite familiar; Widdowson, for instance, expresses it very clearly

(1978: 115), and it recurs in many guides to the teaching of ESL composition.

The problem is in seeing how contextual factors may give rise to this failure of authentic communication, even when teachers make special efforts to avoid it. No doubt, it is desirable to seek genuinely interesting topics, to involve students in the selection and definition of writing tasks, and to adopt process-writing strategies calculated to foreground the development of the individual composer's own message. Also, it is surely worth-while to assign grades and to write comments not only on the formal features of a composition, but also on its creative and communicative qualities. Nonetheless, the hidden curriculum of formal accuracy as the key objective will not likely change much if the students-writing-for-teacher context remains constant. It is conventional -- and useful -- to specify that authentic communication depends on an "information gap" (Morrow, 1981: 62): that is, the existence of a sender with a message and of a receiver who can benfit from it. There is, obviously, no theoretical reason why the ESL student cannot be that sender, and the teacher the receiver. No reason, that is, except the power of their respective social rôles.

In practice, ESL teachers are typically older and (in the target culture) more experienced than ESL students, and they are always more powerful -- after all, they give out the grades, and particularly in ESL, with one or more of

academic progress, job advancement, and even citizenship in the balance, those grades are bound to loom very large! Writing for a teacher -- especially writing in a second language for a second-language teacher -- is thus certain to differ very strongly from almost any real-life, non-academic writing task. No matter how authentic the invitation, in this context students will have great difficulty taking seriously the idea that they can convey genuine information -- facts, opinions, or entertainment -- to their teacher. By contrast, if the students-writing-for-teacher configuration can be escaped, a convincing information gap may be more accessible. And this is where the ESL student newspaper comes in.

HOW?

A student newspaper -- at least potentially -- can break the students-writing-for-teacher mould in two significant ways. Perhaps the less obvious of these is that a student newspaper offers the element of permanence. Long ago the French pedagogue Célestin Freinet argued for the importance of "majestic print" for the work of apprentice writers (1967: 49; cf. 1964: 32). He underlined again and again the need for permanence in all kinds of student productions, not just

compositions, and wondered out loud,

> Would the mason work with taste and enthusiasm, if we systematically destroyed the houses we had just bought from him ...? Would the farmer return to his plow, if likewise his wheat was not accidentally but deliberately cut back to grass, and if the trees he had just planted were all cut down?
>
> (Freinet, 1967: 48 - my translation)

For Freinet, permanence is an essential element in assuring the "dignity" of student work (1967: 48) -- and his comments on youngsters learning to write their L1 are at least as true, if not truer, of adults or young adults struggling to perform in an L2 at a level of sophistication in keeping with their age and their L1 ability.

In Freinet's time, the only way to achieve good-looking permanence was by using a simple classroom printing press, and to this day Freinet schools all have such a device. But desktop publishing offers at once greater flexibility and slicker results. User-friendly software -- such as Unison World's *Newsmaster* -- is available for most computer systems at about $100, allowing not only the manipulation of columns and headlines, but also the integration of library or user-designed graphics. Photocopied, the results are especially professional-looking,

but even with dittos -- which are cheap enough to permit a far larger number of copies, if desired -- a very presentable newspaper can be produced. And off-set printed in the form of a yearbook, text and computer graphics can be combined with actual photographs.

Predictably, Freinet was an early supporter of student newpapers, but he wisely insisted that such projects could only succeed fully if they involved <u>exchanges</u> among schools (1964: 23-4). This is the second, and more obvious, potential value of ESL newspapers; they create an authentic non-teacher <u>audience</u> for student writing. By printing sufficient copies, of reasonable visual quality, students can send their newspaper to other programs ... and, what is more, they can receive others' newspapers in return. Experience confirms that exchanges really do make a difference. If the only audience is to be other students in the same program, it is probably adequate to use a `wall newspaper' format, with a single copy posted on a well-located notice board. But with readership limited to students at the same institution, the newspaper -- printed, or of the wall variety -- all too readily becomes little more than a showplace for work by a few self-important writers, and as such it is really just an extension of the classroom. On the other hand, when the paper begins to have a life far from the classroom, outside the school itself, it has the potential not only for more convincing permanence but also for more authentic communication.

At this point, it is worth recalling the need for determined adherence to communicative goals. To avoid a mere show of communication -- or, at the very least, to maximize the information gap -- inter-school exchanges are needed. As one might expect, these are not easy to arrange. Following a certain general schedule and keeping track of names and addresses can be burdensome, even for the best motivated teacher. Tests, assignments, marking, and a host of other more immediate responsibilities have a tendency to push mailing a bundle of newspapers from the top of one's priority list. Thus, while many colleagues will express interest and even enthusiasm, few will come through in the crunch! Yet, reliable cooperation is essential for success. Luckily, our ESL newspaper gets along very well with just two quite faithful exchange sources, and a number of other more erratic ones. This experience implies that one need not have an enormous network of exchanges ... but to balance this, it is sobering to realize that such a network is probably out of reach, anyway (although, hope springs eternal; my address is at the end of this article)!

Additionally, it is relevant to consider the degree of direct student involvement in the physical production of the newspaper. Ideally, we might hope for a thoroughly autonomous ESL student committee to plan, write and input every edition, and one of my colleagues reports admirable success with just that model (Sivell and Kirkland, 1988: 152-

3). It can, however, be difficult for students to overcome the combined interference of other work, differing timetables, and inadequate meeting space. In our program, we have good results with a student-committee-run newspaper (and a yearbook, too) in our more relaxed summer session, while we usually need distinctly greater teacher involvement in the fall, winter and spring. There is obviously something attractive about using as autonomous an approach as possible, although to be fair, one must observe that with real newspapers it is rare for columnists also to be type-setters! However, a much more important aspect of this issue is the question of what communicative purposes we really want to achieve. If students write their articles on disk -- either as part of a class, or in free time -- and save them as pure ASCII files, and if others create computer graphics using appropriate software, it may matter little if the material is then imported into the eventual newspaper by a teacher rather than by a student committee. Plainly, an element of selection and possibly of editing can be lost to students this way; by contrast, the arguably larger objective of using the newspaper medium to assure a wide readership is retained. Decisions in this respect can only be reached by a tough-minded review of the available options and of the communicative criteria we judge most important. The choice will not be easy, but it is sure to be required at some point.

WHO CARES?

By bringing the resources of desktop publishing to the production of an ESL student newspaper, a number of quite specific advantages can be secured, definitely increasing the communicative potential of this well-known strategy. Among those that have proved most useful for our own newspaper are the following.

Above all, the door is opened to participation by students at a wide range of proficiency levels. Worth-while jobs include difficult tasks like writing original articles, slightly less demanding chores like correcting or editing articles, even simpler work like selecting attractive articles from other programs' newspapers for possible inclusion, and largely non-linguistic contributions in the area of graphics or lay-out. Even comparatively elementary students can get excellent results by finding and cleverly re-captioning cartoons, or by reporting on highly structured projects like interviews or opinion polls. And because with word-processing software it is easy to collate and re-format material from diverse sources -- originally typed and submitted in any order -- the new technology helps make the newspaper much more inviting than ever before.

The elegance and permanence of a neatly word-processed newspaper make it possible to exchange copies with other institutions. Especially when a 'wire service' approach is taken -- borrowing articles (with credit, of

course) from one newspaper for inclusion in another -- the breadth of audience is very much increased. Furthermore, the very act of selecting, and possibly at the same time editing, interesting articles from other newspapers underlines the information-gap principle: reprinted articles recommend themselves by their content, not just by their formal accuracy. This possibility might be particularly favoured by exchanging newspapers on disk, or by modem, although it is in any case perfectly feasible on the basis of hard-copy exchanges, too.

Varied student interests can be catered to by the newspaper format, with columns or sections reflecting areas that genuinely attract different writers (and readers). Many ESL newspapers feature sections for recipes, folklore, jokes and/or proverbs, poems, and lifestyle comments. Fitting all these together without re-typing, and re-ordering or selecting items to meet space requirements, can only be managed by means of word processing. But when we can do this, it means in turn that individually chosen writing projects may have a genuine impact on the newspaper, on the basis of what their content says about the identity, abilities and knowledge of contributors. There need be no predetermined sections or topics, so that as student groups come and go, or as the seasons change, the newspaper will reflect the input of the changing writers. Consequently, from the viewpoint of ESL reading, as well, the newspaper

becomes a very appropriate place to think about discourse-level decisions concerning what sections to read first ... and which to skip! And this process recurs, of course, when students select articles to reprint, or not. The speed and flexibility of word processing make it much easier to reach this communicative goal.

Finally, word processing makes it very convenient for us at once to link and yet to separate classroom and newspaper. Popular and valuable group or pair work around the computer terminal in composition class -- with an emphasis on the process of meaning-creation -- can seem a little empty if the final product just ends up going to the teacher as usual. This situation is changed when the most interesting or entertaining work has a chance of being forwarded, on the say-so of the class as a whole, to the newspaper committee. The theoretically powerful but often under-exploited editing potential of the word processor thus finds its place at the centre of both academic and newspaper ambitions. Of course, compositions will most often be recommended by the class before they have been graded by the teacher. In selecting potential newspaper material, moreover, the teacher should have just a single vote, like each student. In this way, newspaper publication is not reduced to the status of a `reward' for work judged presentable by the teacher; yet, at the same time, the teacher's stress on process writing techniques gains a realistic link to authentic communication

with a real audience of peers. This coordination between classroom and newspaper -- although it cannot be the only source of articles, and although it depends on potentially fragile cooperation from composition teachers who may have little other involvement with the newspaper -- has proven extremely profitable in both directions. But to make it work, at the editing stage as well as in the eventual importing of material into the newspaper, access to word processing is crucial.

NOTE

Interested ESL student newspaper exchangers are invited to contact:

John Sivell
Assoc. Professor, Dept. of Applied Language Studies
Brock University
St. Catharines
Ontario, CANADA L2S 3A1

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